

Deciding What We Mean

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Abstract

Stipulation gives us a degree of control over meaning. By stipulating how I will use a term I am able to determine the meaning it will receive on future occasions of use. My stipulation will affect the truth conditional content of my future utterances. But the mechanisms of stipulation are mysterious. As [Cappelen \(2018\)](#) argues, meaning is typically determined in an inscrutable way by a myriad of external factors beyond our control. How does stipulation override these factors? And the powers of stipulation are limited. Firstly, the power of stipulation is typically short lived. Secondly, some stipulations simply don't get off the ground. What explains the limits of stipulation? I consider and reject two related approaches to stipulation: the speaker meaning approach and the micro-languages approach. I then provide an alternative: the fittingness approach. Stipulation determines meaning by determining the word use it is fitting to hold the speaker to. This account is able to capture the mechanisms and limits of stipulation, whilst also explaining why we should care about stipulative success. I close by briefly drawing out some lessons for conceptual engineering.

1 Stipulation

In this paper I will use the word 'fish' to mean *creatures with fins that live in water*.

I have just stipulated a meaning for 'fish'. This stipulation will have a number of effects. Firstly, it will help you as a reader grasp what I intend to communicate when I say things like 'the only sea food I enjoy is fish'. You will be able to rule out the possibility that I enjoy shell fish. But you won't be able to rule out the possibility that I enjoy whale. My stipulation will also affect how my utterance can be reported. If I had not stipulated what I meant by 'fish' it would have been accurate to report me as saying that I don't like whale. However, given my stipulation, I cannot be reported as having said this. Relatedly, my stipulation affects the truth conditional content of my utterance. Suppose that I don't actually like whale, but I do like hag fish (a finless creature that falls within the usual extension of 'fish'). In this case I'll have said something false. If I know that I like hag fish then I will have lied. And I'll also have violated

the norm of assertion. But without my stipulation I'd have said something true (supposing that I genuinely do dislike all seafood that falls outside of the usual extension of 'fish'). I won't have lied and, if I *know* that I dislike all seafood that falls outside of the typical extension of 'fish', I will have obeyed the norm of assertion.

So, there is an important sense in which my stipulation affects the meaning of 'fish' as it appears in my later utterances. My stipulation granted me a degree of control over the meaning of 'fish', at least within this limited setting. We regularly exercise such agency over meaning. And this agency plausibly extends beyond stipulation. For example, I can choose what object my use of 'that' refers to by pointing. And I can make it clear how other forms of linguistic context sensitivity are to be resolved by, for example, manipulating the question under discussion. But this agency is puzzling.

Firstly, it is not clear how stipulation enables us to manipulate meaning. As Cappelen (2018) points out, linguistic meanings are determined by an incredibly complex myriad of external factors, the vast majority of which are beyond our control, perhaps even beyond our comprehension. If I had not stipulated what I meant by 'fish' then the meaning of 'fish' in 'the only seafood I enjoy is fish' would have been determined by, among other things, a long and complex pattern of use within my community, the opinions of marine biologists, and the initial historical conditions in which some word etymologically related to 'fish' was first introduced. That is, these external factors would have determined the truth conditional content of my utterance. They would have affected whether or not I lied, and whether or not I violated the norm of assertion. But my stipulation somehow overruled all these factors. From whence does stipulation acquire this power?

Secondly, the power of stipulation is limited. For example, the effects of stipulation are typically (although not always) limited to the restricted context in which the stipulation takes place. If, on an unrelated occasion, I say 'the only sea food I enjoy is fish' then 'fish' will take on its normal meaning. My previous stipulation will have no effect. Moreover, stipulation can be unsuccessful even in the original context. Stipulation does not give us the power to mean whatever we want. Consider the following case:

Slurring Stipulation A speaker is addressing a large crowd. The speaker says 'I will use '*****' to mean *people who are lazy and don't pay taxes*', where '*****' is some powerful racial slur. The audience contains a group of people who fall in the usual extension of '*****'. The speaker looks at this group as he says '*****'s don't belong in this country'.

This stipulation does not get off the ground. The speaker can accurately be reported as having said that people of a certain ethnicity do not belong in his country. And his utterance is false precisely because ethnicity is not a legitimate basis for social exclusion. Why is stipulation limited this way? What sets the bounds on our powers of stipulation?

These are the questions I set out to answer in this paper. I will start by considering and rejecting Pinder’s (2021) speaker meaning approach. I will also consider and reject the related claim that stipulations are proposals regarding meanings in micro-languages (Ludlow (2014), Armstrong (2016)). This discussion will lead us to a further question: I’ll argue that stipulation can fail to have its characteristic effects on meaning, and yet still function properly in facilitating communication. But if communication proceeds smoothly why should we care about any additional effects of stipulation? I will argue that stipulation affects the word uses it is fitting to hold us to. That is, it affects the commitments we undertake when we communicate. I then combine this observation with the fittingness based metasemantics recently defended by Peet (Forthcoming) to explain the effects of stipulation on meaning. This account is able to capture the mechanisms and limits of stipulation, whilst also explaining why we should care about full stipulative success.

2 Speaker Meaning & Linguistic Meaning

2.1 Speaker Meaning

The distinction between semantic meaning and speaker meaning is familiar. ‘Speaker meaning’ denotes the way in which a speaker intends to use a term - what *they* mean by the term. ‘Semantic meaning’ denotes what the word actually means, regardless of the speaker’s intentions.

Pinder’s (2021) argues that stipulation constitutes a proposal to use a term in a particular way: Suppose that I stipulate the meaning F for a term a . On the speaker meaning approach I have proposed that we use a to speaker-mean F . If Pinder is correct then stipulation will not seem very puzzling. It is no surprise that we can control what we speaker mean. It is also no surprise that stipulations are effective only within a limited context. If I stipulate the meaning F for a term a then my proposal will typically be limited to the current context. There are exceptions to this: Proposals in conceptual engineering (Pinder’s primary concern) can plausibly be taken as stipulations with intended effects beyond the original context. But conceptual engineering is the exception rather than the rule. We will put conceptual engineering to one side for now. I will return to it in the conclusion.

The speaker meaning approach is mistaken. Firstly, it does not solve all of our problems. It does not explain why our public speaker’s stipulation that ‘****’ mean *lazy people who don’t pay taxes* failed to get off the ground. Pinder acknowledges that speaker meaning has its limits. As he notes, one cannot mean that *Paris is in France* by ‘it’s another beautiful day’ (p 153). He explains this in terms of the limits on what we can rationally intend. I cannot speaker mean *Paris is in France* by ‘it’s another beautiful day’ because I know that the audience will never recover *Paris is in France* from my utterance. Perhaps the same is true of our public speaker? Perhaps he cannot mean *lazy people who don’t pay taxes* by ‘****’ because he knows no rational audience would ever

interpret him this way?

Well, if our public speaker is normal then they will no doubt realize this. So, they will not be able to speaker-mean *lazy people who don't pay taxes* by '****'. But if our speaker is irrational or deluded then there is nothing to stop them speaker-meaning *lazy people who don't pay taxes* by '****'. Yet, this makes no difference to the success of their stipulation. Even if they *intended* to say that lazy people who don't pay taxes don't belong in their country, this is not what they have asserted.

Pinder could perhaps respond that, for a stipulation to be successful, the audience must go along with the stipulation. That is, they must accept the speaker's proposal to use the relevant term in the stipulated way. But this doesn't help. Suppose that our public speaker, through an overwhelming stroke of luck, ends up addressing an audience that is happy to go along with his stipulation. They take him to be speaking out against lazy people who avoid taxes. They don't take him to be saying anything racist. In this case, the stipulation will, according to the speaker meaning approach, be successful. And there is clearly a sense in which this is right: the speaker luckily succeeds in making their intended meaning clear to the audience.

But the speaker's luck with their audience does nothing to change the fact that they have asserted something racist. They have asserted that a particular ethnic group has no place in their country. They can be fittingly reported as having said this. And their assertion is false precisely because ethnicity has nothing to do with who belongs in which country. So, even if they get incredibly lucky with their audience, their stipulation still fails to affect the assertoric content of their utterance. Their stipulation fails to have the effects on meaning characteristic of successful stipulation. This cannot be captured on the speaker meaning approach.¹

This brings us to the broader problem with the speaker meaning approach: stipulation does more than just clarify speaker meaning - it affects what a speaker asserts. And assertoric content can come apart from speaker meaning. This is illustrated by the following mundane case:

Scandinavian Trip Pete has just been on a tour of Scandinavia. His favorite destination was Norway. However, he often gets Norway and Sweden mixed up. So, when he reports his trip to a friend he says 'my favorite country was Sweden', intending to communicate that his favorite country was Norway.

Pete speaker-means that his favorite country was Norway. But this is not what he says or asserts. He asserts that Sweden was his favorite country. As

¹Perhaps we should say he asserts *both* that lazy tax avoiders should be expelled, and that people of a certain ethnicity should be expelled. In this case he will have been successful in affecting the meaning of '****'. I think this is right, and this is captured by my positive proposal. But it doesn't help the speaker meaning approach. If our speaker sincerely specifies that they will *only* mean *lazy people who don't pay taxes* by '****' then the speaker meaning approach will be unable to explain why he is still reportable as having advocated for social exclusion on the basis of ethnicity.

a result, he has asserted something false. When all goes well, speaker-meaning and assertoric content coincide. But cases like **Scandinavian Trip** show that they can come apart. And successful stipulation affects assertoric content. So, the speaker meaning account is at best incomplete.

2.2 Linguistic Meaning

In **Scandinavian Trip** the speaker-meaning and assertoric content of Pete's utterance came apart. The assertoric content was determined by the linguistic meaning of 'Sweden'. That is, it was determined by the meaning of 'Sweden' in Pete's language.

But if assertoric content is determined by linguistic meaning then it once again becomes mysterious how we are able to exercise agency over it. After all, as [Cappelen \(2018\)](#) and [Deutsch \(2020\)](#) argue, stipulation doesn't allow us to alter the meanings of words in English. Even authoritative bodies such as courts seemingly lack the ability to fix linguistic meanings. Cappelen argues as follows:

“Let's take a particular case, say the US courts deciding that corporations are in the extension of 'person' (this is simplifying the legal situation a bit, but the simplification is irrelevant for current purposes). That looks like a case of Control: they have made a decision about what that word should mean and now that's what it does mean. So Lack of Control is false, it would seem. But this objection misdescribes what has happened in such a case. What has happened isn't that they've decided on and created a new meaning for 'person'. What has happened is that they've made/forced certain people to misinterpret sentences containing 'person' in a particular way. The US Supreme Court or any other group can no more change the meaning of 'person' than I can.” [Cappelen,2018](#), p76.

There is a sense in which Cappelen is right, and a sense in which he is wrong. Clarifying the sense in which he is wrong will be suggestive of an alternative account of stipulation. Unfortunately, this alternative solution also fails to explain our data.

Talk of the meaning of a term in a language is really just a way of describing the norms, conventions, and patterns of use, deference, and expectation within a particular linguistic community.² At any given time a typical speaker will be a member of many different language communities. And each community will

²This is not to say that there are no such things as languages - it could be that, for example the norms, conventions, and patterns of use, deference, and expectation prevalent in a community, in combination with facts about the world, ground facts about what words mean in the language of the community. However, it is also consistent with a more lightweight or fictionalist construal of languages according to which talk of the meaning of a term in a language is little more than a loose way of characterizing norms, conventions, and patterns of use, deference, and expectation. I remain neutral on the nature of languages here.

display slightly different patterns of use, deference, and expectation. For example, you the reader are a member of both the community of English speakers, and the community of English speakers minus me, the author. My own little linguistic idiosyncracies constitute one small part of the grand pattern of use, deference, and expectation that determine the meaning of terms in English: the language of the community of English speakers. But they do not play a role in determining the meaning of terms in the language spoken by the community of English speakers minus me. So, we may suppose, the language of each community will be slightly different.³ Thus, when we ask whether it is possible for stipulation to affect the meaning of a term in a language, we must ask ‘which language?’.

When we speak of the meaning of a term in ‘English’ we have in mind the patterns of use in a large linguistic community - a community that contains over a billion speakers. Cappelen is right that a mere stipulation, even by an authoritative body, is powerless to change the meaning of a term in ‘English’. It is fitting to describe a term as having a particular meaning in English only when this meaning fits the patterns of use, expectation, and deference (together with external factors such as referential eligibility) of a truly staggering population. A single stipulation doesn’t have the power to affect the linguistic dispositions of a worldwide community.

However, an act of stipulation may have the power to affect the linguistic dispositions of a smaller community. For example, a stipulation may, for the duration of the relevant discourse, affect the linguistic dispositions of the speaker and their audience. This is a very small and short-lived community. But we will be able to identify dispositions of use, deference, and expectation within this community just as we can in with large linguistic communities. Thus, we can still think of such communities as speaking ‘micro-languages’ (Ludlow (2014) and Armstrong (2016), see also Plunkett and Sundell (2013)).

So, perhaps we should say that stipulation aims to change the meaning of a term in a micro-language? Once again, this would seem to eliminate the mystery of stipulation. It is not especially mysterious how stipulation affects the expectations and dispositions of one’s immediate audience. It is also obvious why these effects would be limited to the original context of stipulation: outside of this context the audience will revert to their default assignments of meaning (which will be more in line with those of the larger linguistic communities to which they belong).

Unfortunately, this approach also fails. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, an audience may stubbornly refuse to go along with a stipulation. As a result, the stipulation will not have its intended effect on the dispositions and

³Perhaps the removal of a single individual from a community will not be sufficient to trigger any differences in meaning. This is not of importance. 1348000000 people speak English. Suppose the removal of a million speakers is enough to make a difference to meaning. Then there will still be an unfathomable number of linguistic communities with different patterns of use and deference that the speaker is a member of at a given time. Although see Williams & Leckie (2019) for a rare attempt to provide an account of *the* linguistic community a speaker belongs to for the sake of determining which language they speak.

expectations of the speaker's immediate interlocutors - it will not change the micro-language. But it may still affect the truth conditional content of their utterance. To see this, consider a paradigmatically reasonable stipulation (from [Pinder \(2021\)](#)):

Luddites There are two types of people who do not use social media. There is the person who is opposed to social media, often having had (and closed) a Facebook account due to its negative effects on society. Call her the Luddite. In contrast, there is the person who has no specific objection to social media, but simply prefers to interact using more traditional means. Call her the Traditionalist. To fight against the spread of social media, we should not seek to increase the number of Luddites: the Luddite is reacting to the popularity of social media, and reactionaries stand little chance of changing mass movements. Rather, we should seek to increase the number of Traditionalists; we should make a movement of traditional means of social interaction. [Pinder, 2021](#), 148-149.

Suppose that Pinder's audience is either stubborn or inattentive. As a result, they fail to take on board his stipulated meaning for 'Luddite' and instead assume that he's discussing people who are opposed to the development of new technology. For example, when he says 'the Luddite is reacting to the popularity of social media' they take him to be suggesting that people who are opposed to the development of new technology are reacting to the popularity of social media. Perhaps this is what 'the Luddite is reacting to the popularity of social media' ends up meaning in the micro-language consisting of Pinder and his audience. Nonetheless, his audience is mistaken. Pinder has not said that people who are opposed to the development of new technology are reacting to the popularity of social media. He has not said anything false. Rather he has said that people who refuse to use social media because of its negative social effects are reacting against the popularity of social media. And this is true. So, in one sense at least, his stipulation was successful. Despite failing to change the meaning of 'Luddite' in the micro-language of his interlocutors, he has affected the meaning of 'Luddite' as it appears in his later utterances.

Secondly, the micro-languages story, like the speaker meaning approach, fails to account for the limits of stipulation. Consider **Slurring Stipulation** again. Our speaker stipulated that '****' (usually a powerful racial slur) was to mean *lazy people who don't pay taxes*. He then looked at a group of audience members who fall within the normal extension of the slur and said '****s have no place in this country'. As we noted above, even if our speaker does, by pure luck, end up addressing an audience that is willing to accept his stipulation, this will not affect the assertoric content of his utterance. His utterance will still be false precisely because race is not a legitimate basis for social exclusion. But the micro-language approach tells us that, if the speaker lucks out with their audience, then the stipulation was successful. After all, the speaker has succeeded in changing the meaning of '****' in the micro-language spoken by

themselves and their immediate interlocutors. They have successfully set new patterns of use an expectation for the word ‘****’ in this short-lived micro-community.

The proponent of micro-languages might respond by endorsing a form of content relativism. That is, they might suggest that what a speaker asserts must be relativized to a language. Relative to the micro-language of our public speaker and his immediate audience he asserts something true. However, in *our* micro-language - the language spoken by our fictional public speaker, myself, and you the reader, he says something false. After all, we would not be willing to go along with the stipulation. The same response can be given to the Luddite argument: Relative to our micro-language Pinder has said something about people who are opposed to social media. Relative to the micro-language of his imaginary stubborn or inattentive audience he has said something about people who are opposed to technological development.⁴

I don’t find this response convincing. It seems clear that Pinder’s stubborn audience would be making a mistake in tokening the thought ‘Pinder said something false’. Likewise, our public speaker’s audience is making a mistake when they token the thought ‘he only said that lazy tax avoiders should be expelled’. They are mistaken in their judgement that he has not said anything racist. It is not clear how the content relativist can capture this. They could perhaps suggest that there is something defective about the micro-languages spoken by our misguided audiences, and that their mistake lies in speaking the wrong micro-language. This is just to say that the audiences display the wrong patterns of use, deference, and expectation. Pinder’s stipulation had an effect on what constitutes the right pattern of use, deference, and expectation. Our public speaker’s stipulation had no such effect. But this just takes us back to square one. The question becomes, what constitutes the right meaning for a term? And how does stipulation affect this? My positive proposal will shed light on this. But before turning to the positive proposal it is worth mentioning a further question that is raised by the foregoing.

2.3 Why Care about Stipulative Success?

I have considered and rejected two approaches to stipulation: the speaker meaning approach and the micro-languages approach. The speaker meaning approach holds that stipulation constitutes a proposal regarding what to speaker-mean with a term. The micro-language approach holds that stipulation alters meaning within the micro-language of the speaker and their interlocutors. Both approaches failed to capture the impact of stipulation on assertoric content. So, they failed to capture the full effects of stipulation on meaning.

But this raises a question: the speaker meaning and micro-language approaches both make it obvious why we should care about stipulative success. After all, stipulation aids successful communication. But the cases I have presented

⁴For a defense of content relativism see Cappelen (2008). It is not clear that Cappelen would approve of this form of content relativism as he does not advocate for micro-languages (see his (2018), pp 163-170.)

suggest that stipulation can perform all of its communicative functions and still fall short of full success. That is, stipulation can affect the micro-language of the speaker and their interlocutors and support the recovery of speaker-meaning without affecting assertoric content. But if that is right, then why should we care about stipulative success? It would seem to be communicatively irrelevant, meaning that full stipulative success is of little importance.

3 Meaning and Responsibility

In providing an account of stipulation it will be instructive to begin with our final question: why should we care about stipulative success? Stipulation, it seems, can perform all its communicative functions without having its characteristic effects on meaning. Why should we care about the effects of stipulation beyond those that contribute to communicative success?

The answer is that we do more than communicate when we speak. That is, speakers do more than simply cause their audiences to entertain particular propositions. When we speak we also undertake commitments. We become responsible for certain claims about the world. It becomes fitting to hold us to these claims - to expect us to defend them, and to judge us negatively if they turn out to be false.⁵ The fact that speech generates such commitments plays a key role in explaining why testimony provides reasons for belief. It plays a key role in explaining why we generally speak truthfully.

Moreover, it is clear that speakers should care about what they commit themselves to. They should care about what they can be held to, and the reactive attitudes their speech acts will garner. This, I suggest, is why we should care about stipulative success: stipulation affects the claims we can be fittingly held to. When I stipulated that ‘fish’ mean *creature with fins that lives under the water* this affected the use of ‘fish’ it was fitting to hold me to. It was no longer fitting to hold me to the normal use of ‘fish’ when I uttered ‘the only seafood I enjoy is fish’. Rather, because of my stipulation it became fitting to hold me to the claim that the only aquatic creatures I enjoy eating have fins. This is what my utterance committed me to.

The fact that a speaker unluckily ends up addressing a stubborn or inattentive audience does not affect the proposition or word use it is fitting to hold them to. Following Pinder’s stipulation that ‘Luddite’ mean *person who is opposed to social media* it becomes fitting to hold him to this use of ‘Luddite’. When he says ‘the Luddite is reacting to the popularity of social media’ he has committed to a claim about people who are opposed to social media. This is what it is fitting to hold him to. It is not fitting to hold him to a claim about people who are opposed to technological development. The fact that his audience was too stubborn or inattentive to go along with his stipulation does not change this. Likewise, the fact that our racist public speaker was lucky enough to address an audience willing to go along with their absurd stipulation does

⁵See for example Peirce (1934), Brandom (1983), Watson (2004), Rescorla, (2009), Macfarlane (2011), and Viebahn (2021).

not affect the use of ‘****’ it is fitting to hold him to. Any reasonable audience would interpret him as advocating for social exclusion on the basis of race. This is what he should be held to.⁶

So, we have identified an effect that stipulation has beyond its role in facilitating communication. And I have suggested that this is an effect that we should care about. But the question we are interested in concerns the impact of stipulation on meaning - its impact on assertoric content. How do these observations help?

Well, they help if, as Peet (Forthcoming) has argued, there is a connection between a term’s meaning (i.e. its contribution to the assertoric content of an utterance) and the use it is fitting to hold the speaker to. Peet argues that the meaning a term receives on an occasion of use corresponds to the use it is fitting to hold the speaker to. That is, the value a term receives on an occasion of use corresponds to the use that there is the most objective reason to hold the speaker to. There will typically be a myriad of reasons for and against holding a speaker to a particular use of a term. Examples include the fact that they intended to use the term in a particular way, the fact that a typical audience member would interpret them a particular way, the fact that the term is used in a particular way in the speaker’s linguistic community, and the fact that a particular referent is especially eligible. On a given occasion of use, the meaning of a term will be determined by a weighing of these (and many other) reasons. The assertoric content of an utterance is, Peet suggests, directly determined either compositionally or via bridge principles by the meanings of the words used on an occasion. So, an utterance’s assertoric content is the proposition it is fitting to hold a speaker to directly in light of the specific word uses it is fitting to hold them to.⁷

We have seen that stipulation affects the word use it is fitting to hold a speaker to. So, if Peet (Forthcoming) is right, we are able to explain the impact of stipulation on meaning: the meaning a term receives on an occasion of use corresponds to the use it is fitting to hold the speaker to, and this is affected by stipulation.

But what about the questions with which we began? How does stipulation override the inscrutable external factors that normally determine the meanings of the words we use, and thus the propositions we assert? And, what explains the limits of stipulation? The fact that its effects are short lived and local, and the fact that certain stipulations simply cannot get off the ground? I will address these questions in turn.

Assertoric content is typically determined by myriad of inscrutable factors that are beyond our control. These factors include, among other things, patterns of use within our community, the opinions and discoveries of experts, the eligibility of referents, and the lexical effects of our terms. The reason these factors determine assertoric content is that they play a role in determining the

⁶As noted earlier, they can also be reported as having advocated for the exclusion of lazy tax avoiders. But this is captured by my account, as it is also fitting to hold them to the claim that lazy tax avoiders should be excluded.

⁷For a similar proposal see Gauker (2007).

word use it is fitting to hold the speaker to. If experts in the speaker's community use a term in a particular way, this will often be a reason to hold the speaker to that use. If a particular referent is more eligible than others, this favors holding the speaker to the corresponding use. Metasemantics is inscrutable and intractable for a number of reasons: Firstly, the range of factors that could conceivably count for or against holding a speaker to a particular word use on a particular occasion is endless. Secondly, different factors will acquire different weights in different contexts. There is no clear way to systematize the weighing of these reasons.

However, the fact that a speaker has stipulated a particular meaning for a term strongly favours holding them to that use of the term. Their stipulation telegraphs the way in which they are using the term. Regardless of the way a word is used in the wider community, and regardless of which referents are more eligible, or the opinions of scientific experts, if a speaker makes it clear that they intend to use a word in a particular way, that will almost always be the use it is most fitting to hold them to.

But, of course, there are exceptions.

There are cases in which stipulation does not get off the ground. These include cases in which the speaker is sincere (if somewhat deluded) in their stipulation, and their audience goes along with them. For example, in **Slurring Stipulation** our public speaker's stipulation that '****' mean *lazy tax avoiders* failed to get off the ground. If the stipulation had been successful they would have said that lazy tax avoiders have no place in their country. This is still probably false. But it is not as obviously false as what they did assert: that members of a particular ethnic group have no place in their country.

The reason this stipulation doesn't get off the ground is that, despite the stipulation, it is more fitting to hold the speaker to the standard use of '****'. No rational or reasonable audience would take the speaker's stipulation seriously. Any rational audience would take the stipulation to be a ham-fisted attempt to say something racist whilst retaining plausible deniability. Moreover, some words have such power that we cannot simply disassociate them from their usual meanings. Racial slurs are like this. The imagery and emotional responses they evoke are so powerful that they can be triggered even by etymologically unrelated but phonetically similar words. These associations count strongly in favor of holding users of slurs to their standard derogatory meanings.

We also saw that the effects of stipulation are temporary - typically restricted to the original context of utterance. This is because audiences outside the original context, even if they were present in the original context, will no longer expect the stipulated meaning to be in play. They may not be aware of, or may not remember the original stipulation. And, even if they do remember it, they will be unlikely to assume that the speaker expects them to remember it. So, reasonable and rational audiences outside of the original context will interpret the speaker in line with the normal meaning of the term rather than its stipulated meaning. This constitutes a strong reason to hold the speaker to the normal non-stipulated meaning in such contexts.

So, the fittingness approach to metasemantics is well placed to explain the

impact of stipulation on meaning. Indeed, it can do more than this. We are able to influence the meanings of our words through countless means other than stipulation. For example, we can fix demonstrative reference by raising a particular object to salience, and we can influence the resolution of context sensitivity by manipulating the question under discussion (see [Schoubye & Stokke \(2016\)](#), and [Stokke \(2016\)](#)). We are able to do this because there are countless ways of influencing the word uses it is fitting to hold us to. For example, the word use it is fitting to hold a speaker to will be typically be affected by the manner in which a reasonable hearer would interpret them. So, any way to prime a reasonable audience towards a particular interpretation could potentially affect the word use it is fitting to hold the speaker to. And there are innumerable ways to do this.⁸

4 Conclusion

I started by outlining some puzzling features of stipulation. First, it is unclear why stipulation is able to affect meaning. Secondly, it is unclear what determines the limits of stipulation. I also went on to identify a third question: why should we care about stipulative success? I considered and rejected two related accounts of stipulation: the speaker meaning approach and the micro-language approach. I then presented an alternative: stipulation affects meaning by affecting the word uses it is fitting to hold the speaker to. Combined with [Peet's \(Forthcoming\)](#) fittingness based metasemantics this explains the affect of stipulation on meaning. It also explains the limits of stipulation, and why we should care about stipulative success.

Finally, I pointed out that the fittingness approach explains our ability to manipulate meaning through means other than stipulation. There I was concerned with a subject's ability to control the meanings of terms in their own utterances. However, the point generalizes. There has been much recent interest in conceptual engineering: the idea that we can solve philosophical problems and fight for social justice by altering the meanings of our words.⁹ One of the main challenges to conceptual engineering is the implementation problem ([Cappelen \(2018\)](#), [Deutsch \(2020\)](#)): the question of how it is that conceptual engineers are able to affect the meaning of a term in a community given the fact that meaning is dependent in an inscrutable way on a myriad of factors beyond our control.

I am not going to attempt a full answer to the implementation problem. I agree that conceptual engineering will typically be very difficult, and it will often

⁸A similar point is made in a different context by [Buchanan and Schiller \(Forthcoming\)](#).

⁹Not all conceptual engineers conceive of their task in this way. For example, [Simion and Kelp \(2020\)](#) and [Flocke \(Forthcoming\)](#) each, in different ways, present the conceptual engineer as being concerned with developing different ways of representing or thinking about the world. My own view is that there are various different activities that fall under the heading of 'conceptual engineering'. These include, as [Simion and Kelp \(2020\)](#) and [Flocke \(Forthcoming\)](#) would have it, developing different ways of representing the world. But they also include changing the meanings of words. And it is this latter activity with which I am concerned here.

leave a great deal to chance. However, the fittingness view of metasemantics does give us some insight into how conceptual engineering proposals can get off the ground. They can do so by affecting the word uses it is reasonable to hold other speakers to. By introducing and advertising novel proposals for word use conceptual engineers can make these word uses available to speakers in a wide range of contexts. And, by arguing for the superiority of these uses over alternatives they introduce and raise to salience reasons to hold speakers to these uses. These arguments will have to be balanced against competing reasons to determine the word use it is fitting to hold a speaker to on a given occasion, and if the arguments for adopting a particular use are not widely known then they will have little weight in most cases. But this is just as it should be. Conceptual engineering proposals typically do not, by themselves, have a major impact on meaning. But the enterprise would be irrational if they had no impact. The fittingness proposal provides a mechanism for understanding the (typically minimal) impact conceptual engineering proposals have on meaning.

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